

COKER, NANCY JANE DOBBS. INTERVIEW 10417^x

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COKER, NANCY JANE DOBBS. INTERVIEW. Form A-(S-149)

10417

BIOGRAPHY FORM

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WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

Field Worker's name Zaidee B. Bland

This report made on (date) April 13, 1938 1938

1. Name Nancy Jane Dobbs Coker

2. Post Office Address Altus, Oklahoma.

3. Residence address (or location) 1206 North Hudson Street

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month August Day 31 Year 1861

5. Place of birth East Tennessee

6. Name of Father Eli T. Southerland Place of birth South Carolina

Other information about father _____

7. Name of Mother Martha Stewart Place of birth East Tennessee

Other information about mother _____

Notes or complete narrative by the field worker dealing with the life and story of the person interviewed. Refer to Manual for suggested subjects and questions. Continue on blank sheets if necessary and attach firmly to this form. Number of sheets attached 13.

Zaidee B. Bland
Journalist
April 13, 1938

Interview with Nancy J. Dobbs Coker
Altus, Oklahoma.

My husband and I were always having chills and fever in Tennessee. We decided to sell out and go West and see if we would not have better health. We sold everything we had and bought tickets to McKinney, Collin County, Texas. When we got on the train there was a man on the train handing out circulars about Oklahoma. We took one and read it and husband said, "Let's go to Oklahoma," But I said, "No, I am afraid of the Indians." We went on to Collin County and stayed three years. We still had chills and fever. We had four children, two girls and two boys.

One day Husband came in from plowing feeling so badly and said to me "I have skinned my shins long enough on these old stumps. I am going to sell out and go to a prairie country and maybe we can find health along with the next move." I stayed on with the children but he got into his wagon and started out prospecting. This land up here was really called "NO MAN'S LAND", for Texas and Oklahoma were both claiming it. My husband was camping at Doan's Crossing when he met a man who would give a quit claim deed to as pretty a level 160 acres as one

would want to see, two miles east of where the town of Humphreys now stands. Husband came on up and looked it over. There was a little fencing done, but that was all. He gave the man the hundred dollars and built us a house three feet in the ground. He put two windows in it and a plank floor. He had to go to Vernon for all supplies. He sent for me and the children and we came to Vernon on the train and he met us there. One of the first things husband did was to dig a well, for it was so very dry that he could not get water for his stock. It was our intention to go in the stock raising business. We got ^{an} abundance of cold clear water but it was hard to cook and wash in. It was the first good water north of Doan's Crossing and it soon got ~~to~~ be the camping place after leaving the river going north, as well as sometime going south, for we were right on the main trail where the cattle and horses were driven north to market. I have seen the lanes so choked with horses or cows that they could hardly move along without some of them being pushed into the wire. It was sometimes a nuisance, too, for if a gap was left down our crop would be eaten up in a jiffy. It was July, 1890, when I got here with the children and it was surely a hot dry summer.

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Mr. Dobbs had two orphan nephews working at Vernon. Wages were not very good and they slept in a basement. We were about the only people the boys knew about. They both began to have fever so they bought them a gig and horse and came up to be with us. They began to get better right away with the care I gave them, but were weak and could not get around much.

Husband was all run down and never had got the malaria out of his system, we thought. One real hot day he went over to Otter Creek seining for fish and did not take his wet clothes off. That night he took fever and in just a few days he was dead, October 12, 1890. He had plowed only one round in the field for fall planting of wheat. We never knew if his nephews brought him the typhoid fever or what, for there were no doctors to be had. There was a preacher about twelve miles away that we sent for to hold services over his body before we put him away. I had to send to Vernon for a coffin and a shroud. Two neighbors volunteered to go and it took them two days and a night to go and come. His was the second body placed in the graveyard that afterwards became known as the "Francis Graveyard". It was begun on Mr. James' place when his nineteen year old son died. Every one was so good to us all,

just like brothers and sisters. My neighbors all were so very kind. Winter was coming on and fall plowing had to be done and I had four horses that were^a/problem to me, with no shelter of any kind for them. I had a brother still single back at home in Tennessee. He now wrote me if I would come back home I would be taken care of just like I was before I married. This was a great temptation for me to go, for this country had been so hot and dry that I was disgusted, but I wrote my brother and mother that this was mine and the children's home and that I guessed I had better stay. We had a home here and I guessed I would tough it out. It almost took my life blood sometimes, but here I am and one of my grandsons is County Treasurer now. I have raised a nice family.

I said to one of my neighbors one day- "Do you think you could build a shelter for my horses out of nothing?" He studied a few minutes and said to me, "I believe I can." He took one of my teams and went to his home and brought back a sod plow. He began to turn up the sod and some of the neighbors came in to help and they built me a sod shelter for the horses. The walls were built upon three sides and open to the south. They put poles across the top and grass on that, then some more sod to keep the grass from blowing off. That made a good warm

shelter for the horses all winter and they came out in the spring as slick and fat as you please. I would tie a rope across the open side on bad days to keep them from coming out.

I had some chickens, but since I did not have a hen house the wolves caught most of them. We had milk cows and had our own meat and lard. Flour, coffee, sugar and such things as had to be brought from Vernon the neighbors always brought for me. No one ever went to Vernon without coming by and asking what they could bring out for me. The boys twisted rabbits and out of holes and quail/prairie chickens were plentiful. A neighbor occasionally sent me deer meat.

We never had to go hungry, but ^{fuel}/was a problem. I would borrow another wagon and take the boys and go across North Fork of Red River, away upon Otter Creek for wood. We hoarded that wood like gold for it was so very hard to get. It always took us two days so we had to camp out usually two nights every time we went for wood, and then we were always afraid of the Indians or of getting arrested. One of our horses would not pull in the sand. He seemed afraid of the quicksand and would balk most every time. We tried every-

thing on him. I would take off my bonnet or apron and tie his eyes up good and tight, hoping to keep him from knowing when we would get into the sand, but as soon as his front feet struck the sand, stop he would. We always had to double team across the river anyway but sometimes it would take us ^a/half day to get across the river because that horse gave us so much trouble.

James and John dug a complete home in the ground right behind my home and one very cold day James came in and said, "Mamma my house is a lot warmer than yours, come and see." He had his house complete with a fireplace made from stones he had found scattered over the prairie. I went down to see and sure enough it was very much warmer, so I moved enough bedding and cooking things into his home to stay through the blizzard, for it took so much less wood. After that whenever a cold snap would come up we would go live with the boys until it was over.

When I would not go back home to my mother and brother they came to live with me that next year. Mother was great for company and would go to preaching and invite most of the congregation home with her for dinner, and they would come, too, but the next time we had preaching perhaps they would go to some other place to eat for we were all social and wanted to be together as much as possible.

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I do not remember of ever seeing antelopes but once. Looking out of my window one morning I saw seven in a herd, passing through my pasture going east, I guess to the more open country. There were wolves a plenty, badgers a few, snakes, tarantulas and centipedes everywhere.. They kept me scared to death. I have killed a lot of them but they never harmed a one of us that I knew of. Screech owls that lived in prairie dog holes were bad after my chickens. I think they caught as many as the snakes and hawks, not counting the coyotes.

There was a lot of water hauled from my well. Seemed like Sunday was the favorite day. One day I had gone to church and a bunch of boys came for water after I was gone. I do not remember why my own boys did not go but they were at home. When I got home those boys had wrestled all over the place, ridden my calves and torn up generally. I was so very mad, for I knew that their home folks needed that water and I did not like to have my calves ridden ^{for} I was afraid they would stunt them. I began to scold them and told them they were like a bunch of young mules or roosters. At that they began to fill their barrels full of water, but while some of the boys would be drawing water others of them

would perch on top of a wagon wheel and flap their arms and crow like a rooster. They went out the gate with some of them crowing as far as I could hear them.

The most beautiful sight this country had for us early settlers was the mirage. I never tired of watching the horizon for the new scenes that the mirage would unfold to our eyes. It seemed that everything you ever wished for or imagined could be seen in the mirage.

My children had to go to school in a dugout the first years; we also had preaching in the dugout at Dunbar and Francis, too. The children went to both places at different years.

I needed more fencing and wanted a house. Mr. Dobbs had a brother who was a doctor back in Collins County and he now decided to come up here. He shipped several carloads of bois d'arc posts to Vernon. I got enough posts to fence my entire 160 acres. He moved real near us and was a great help as long as he stayed for he always had a lot of things around him- plows, gigs, buggies and wagons and we were free to use anything he had. He did not stay but a few years, though. He said he had to go back where people got sick to make a living; not enough people got sick here.

We had thirteen years straight of good crops. I burned corn for fuel several winters, for coal cost twelve dollars a ton at Vernon and then had to be hauled thirty-five miles, besides crossing the river. I had to haul my corn to Vernon to sell it at all and then could get only fifteen cents a bushel for it. It seemed a pity to burn such great big ears of corn but we had to stay warm. We did not know we could raise cotton. An old man of the name of Pike planted a little cotton and it made a bale but he had to haul it to Wichita Falls to get it ginned and I remember he drove a yoke of oxen to his wagon.

Since I was on the main trail north drummers and salesmen of different kinds began to come through and would stop and stay all night with me. They always paid well for a bed and food for themselves and horses. I remember there was one drummer who always stopped with me every time he came through for more than twenty years. Once he brought his wife and he stopped at the well and told his wife to go on into the house. She came to the door and asked if she might stay all night. Of course, I did not know her and hesitated a minute for I knew it was about time for this man to come through and I could only spare one bed. As I hesitated she said to me,

"Oh! I am his wife. You need not hesitate." I said, "Whose wife anyway?" As though that would have made any difference, for we did not ask questions, supposing everyone was honest. If not it was none of our business. I believe people were more Spiritual minded in those days than they are now anyway.

Every year something somewhere would be blown away by storms. We surely watched clouds. We were eighty miles south and west in Texas when we saw that first Snider storm forming in the southwest and start in a northwesterly direction. It would dip, not blowing on the ground all the time. When it dipped it tore everything up in its path. Both my brother and mother were killed in that storm and lots of stock was killed. I had a plank shed by now and a granary and they were in splinters. My milk cows huddled in a corner of the fence and their bodies were as full of splinters as they could stick.

The biggest prairie fire I ever saw was caused by a woman making a fire around her kettle out of doors to render lard. A stiff wind came up suddenly out of the northwest and blew that fire twenty feet from the pot and started the fire.

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People from as far north and east as Navajo had to come out and start to plowing to get a wide enough place plowed to stop the fire.

I had a lot of trouble with my children having risings all over their bodies. One of my sons called them "my fall down places" because they usually left a sunken place when they healed. A preacher came along and told me what to do every spring so that they would not have them: Get equal parts of salts, cream of tartar and sulphur and give doses of it to the children every spring and they would not have risings, and they never did after I began to give them that mixture.

I forgot to tell you the house and all was wrecked when mother and brother were killed and the papers and everything scattered for miles around. My brother's insurance papers were picked up thirty-five miles from home and my nieces got the insurance on the papers, too.

The first church building OLD GREER COUNTY ever had was an old abandoned dance hall at Navajo that the Baptists bought and moved to a new location, repaired it and had it for a church.

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I soon learned to plant only wheat, except garden. I learned to plow my garden myself and always had a good one. We neighbors always tried to help in every way. One evening a crowd of boys ganged up out at my barn and after while one of the smaller boys came in and said, "Those boys out there are planning to run away". This alarmed me a little and I was hurrying to put my dishes away to go to my nearest neighbor to tell her about it, as she had some boys among the crowd. I thought we would talk it over and see what might be done about it, for of course I did not want my boys to run away and I felt sure she did not want hers to either. But the boys had sent a little boy to tell her, too, so before I got my dishes done I looked out and there was Mrs. Lisk fanning those boys out with a board. She brought the board with her from her home and did not wait to see who had planned it or whose boys she was whipping she just lit into them. She always said by the time she was through with them they had forgotten about running away. I guessed it was true, anyway the boys did not run away.

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They often referred to the incident as the boarding the boys got straightened them out from planning any more mischief.